Maintaining Volunteer Engagement in a Pandemic

In the current public health emergency, many volunteer involving organisations are facing difficult decisions around managing the health and wellbeing of their staff (employees and volunteers), whilst continuing to provide services to the community. Almost all organisations at this time are being faced with changing the way they work, changing how programs are delivered, or stopping programs altogether.

It is important to maintain engagement with your volunteers through these times. Your volunteers have committed their time and energy to your organisation or cause, and they know your organisation well - they will be vital to your organisation over the coming months and as things eventually return to pre-COVID-19 operations. Your volunteers will likely have formed strong social connections with other volunteers and employees, and these connections are important to maintain.

Keeping volunteers engaged while they work remotely in their usual role

If you are fortunate that your volunteering roles can be undertaken remotely, you need to ensure that you continue to connect with your volunteers and keep them engaged without the usual face-to-face contact. All of the principles of good volunteer management continue to apply, and we encourage you to consider the following:

- Include volunteers in staff communications (unless there are particular reasons not to, such as sharing of confidential information).
- Enable communications to take place by email, phone, teleconference or videoconference, and ensure your volunteers have the required resources and technology to participate.
- Assess whether your volunteers need any additional training to help them work remotely (such as training in new technology platforms).
- Ensure that volunteers know their lines of communication, who to report to, how to report in and when (for example, by email or phone each time they 'clock on').
- Ensure that volunteers know who they can talk to, and how to contact them, if they are experiencing issues or problems with working remotely.

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Many people volunteer for social connection and working remotely can severely impact this aspect of the volunteering experience. There are many ways you can keep your volunteers engaged socially – just be sure to find platforms and methods that work for your organisation and your volunteers. These might include emails, videoconference, online chat channels or apps for non-work related conversations. Be sure to adhere to privacy principles if volunteers are using personal emails or accounts. You also need to respect that some volunteers may not wish to be involved in online social activities.

One of the main motivations for volunteering is to give back to the community. It is important that you continue to communicate to your volunteers, as well as to your employees, the impact that your organisation is having. Share specific examples of how the contribution of volunteers and employees working remotely is making a positive difference. Even if you are managing to maintain business as usual services, you are doing so under extreme circumstances while adhering to health advice around physical distancing, thereby supporting the broader community to stay safe and healthy!

Keeping volunteers engaged if they can't work remotely in their usual role

If your organisation has deemed that it is unsafe or unfeasible for volunteers to work remotely in their existing roles, both your organisation and your volunteers will still benefit if you continue to keep them engaged. Continued engagement is key to retaining your volunteer cohort into the future.

Redeployment

It is worth considering whether your volunteers could be deployed into different roles that could be conducted remotely. To do this, you will need to determine your business priorities and whether there are any roles to support your immediate priorities that are appropriate for a volunteer to fill. If there is, you might need to speak to your volunteers to understand their skills and motivations. Some volunteers may not wish to be redeployed into different roles, but others may be seeking ways in which they can continue to help your organisation. As always, when considering a volunteer role description, ensure it is appropriate for a volunteer and that a new position description is drafted and agreed on with the volunteer.

Standing down

If you need to stand down your volunteers (or your volunteers choose to take a break), there are still ways to keep them engaged with your organisation.

Ask your volunteers whether they wish to be contacted regularly, and their preferred method of communication (phone call or email). Regular communication with your volunteers is vital to check in with how they are and to let them know what your organisation is doing and the impact it is having. If your organisation is no longer providing any services, you can still communicate your plans for when you think you will recommence services, and how important your volunteers are to those plans.

If your volunteers have previously connected with each other socially, encourage them to find a way to continue those relationships (over the phone or online). Again, be aware of privacy considerations and do not share volunteers' personal information without consent.

Time off from their volunteering role might be a great opportunity for your volunteers to do some online training. There are many free training options currently being offered – with your support, your volunteers could identify skills or information that could be useful and sign up for a training session or program. Time spent in training related to their volunteering role could also be logged as volunteer hours for your organisation. Along with these more formal training options, there are also a wide range of books or podcasts that could provide useful information or insights for your volunteers. You might just need to invest some time in identifying options that are relevant for your organisation.

When checking in with your volunteers, also take the time to check on their health and wellbeing. If your organisation has an employee assistance program that is available to volunteers, make sure they know how to access it.

More information on volunteering and on the COVID-19 health emergency is available at volunteeringact.org.au.